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Medics Rap an FBI Poster

WASHINGTON — (NNS) — The appearance of an FBI wanted poster in a journal of the American Medical Association has been attacked for turning the medical profession "into an extension of the police functions of society."

The charge was leveled by Dr. Willard Gaylin, a psychiatrist and president of the Institute for Society, Ethics and the Life Sciences, a New York think-tank that studies the ethical and legal implications of new developments in science and medicine.

In an article for publication next month in the institute's Report, Gaylin attacked the AMA's decision to reproduce the FBI poster in its magazine, "Archives of Dermatology."

The poster, identical to those that appear in police stations and post offices, described Roberta Brent Smith, wanted for allegedly possessing explosives. It was unique in only one respect, Gaylin said.

The woman was described on the poster as having a severe case of "acne vulgaris" — uncommon in adults — that "could necessitate treatment by a dermatologist," the kind of doctor that reads the magazine.

Gaylin questioned the AMA's decision to cooperate with the government "in an area so alien to the traditional medical mission as tracking down criminals."

An AMA spokesman said Hugh G. Grasty, editor of the Journal of the American Medical Association and the organization's scientific publications director, authorized publication of the FBI poster in the dermatology journal. The FBI had requested it.

"I ran it as a public service, and I will continue to do so," the spokesman quoted Grasty as saying.

The spokesman also said FBI posters had appeared "at least two other times" in various AMA publications.

Gaylin says the printing of the poster "involves such . . . questions as confidentiality and trust, private needs versus public rights, professional values versus personal ethics, the special role of the healer and saver of life, and the power of the state."

A police suspect with heart disease or some other potentially fatal illness could be prevented from seeking treatment for fear of being turned in by doctors who had read FBI posters in medical journals, he said.

The files doctors carry on patients would "make an invaluable data bank" for police use and facilitate their work, Gaylin said, "But is that the function of medicine?"